

# UNIT FIVE: CIVIL WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION

## LESSON 18

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# WHY DID THE SOUTH SECEDE?

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### LESSON DESCRIPTION

The students examine information in a series of visuals about the strengths and weaknesses of the South and the North on the eve of the Civil War. They analyze alternative approaches to eliminating slavery, and they discuss the costs and benefits each side anticipated in choosing to fight the Civil War.

In fighting the Civil War, the North had many clear advantages over the South including a larger population, more industries, more railroads, more farms and more financial institutions. Confederate wealth was largely held in the form of slaves and land.

### MYSTERY

In light of the economic advantages of the North over the South, it seems in retrospect almost irrational for the South to have engaged the North militarily. Why did the South secede?

### ECONOMIC HISTORY

For decades, the United States had considered alternatives for dealing with slavery. Each alternative entailed a set of costs and benefits. Some proposed compromises to limit the spread of slavery. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 was an example of a solution that lasted for several years. Others proposed various forms of emancipation of slaves including federal compensation to slave owners.

The South faced alternatives regarding the future of slavery. Economic reasoning suggests that the South believed it was choosing the most advantageous combination of benefits over costs in deciding to fight.

### CONCEPTS

- Alternatives
- Benefits
- Costs

### OBJECTIVES

Students will:

1. Use economic reasoning to explain why the South was willing to fight the North in the Civil War.
2. Identify alternative approaches to eliminating slavery.
3. Identify the expected costs and benefits associated with alternative approaches to eliminating slavery.

### CONTENT STANDARDS

#### Economics

- People respond predictably to positive and negative incentives. (NCEE Content Standard 4)

#### History

- The causes of the Civil War. (Era 5, Standard 1, National Standards for History)
- The course and character of the Civil War and its effects on the American people. (Era 5, Standard 2, National Standards for History)

### TIME REQUIRED

45 minutes

### MATERIALS

- A transparency of Visuals 18.1, 18.2, 18.3, 18.4 and 18.5
- A copy of Activity 18.1 for each student

### PROCEDURE

1. Explain to the class that among historians much confusion surrounds the decision of the South to fight the Civil War. To a person who looks back today at the overwhelming economic advantages of the North on the eve of the war, it may seem surprising that the South was willing to

fight. Was the South irrational to fight the North? (*Accept a variety of answers.*)

2. Display Visual 18.1. Explain that while Mr. Faulkner exaggerated the numbers involved, his notion that the North was vastly superior to the South in resources is correct.
3. Display Visual 18.2 and Visual 18.3. Discuss the economic advantages of the North over the South.
4. Explain that slavery was a central issue in the South's decision to fight for its independence from the North. On the eve of the Civil War, the institution itself appeared to be economically viable. There was little sign that it would be easily abolished.
5. Display Visual 18.4. Discuss the alternative approaches to eliminating slavery, one point at a time. Ask:
  - For each alternative, what were the probable consequences?
  - For each alternative, who would bear the financial costs?
  - How did people in the North and the South weigh the costs and benefits in question?
6. One alternative (the third one shown on Visual 18.4) was military action: To eliminate slavery, fight a war against the South. In assessing the last alternative on Visual 18.4, the students should consider whether further compromise might have been possible and might therefore have prevented war.
7. Display Visual 18.5. Explain that the Missouri Compromise of 1820 admitted Missouri and Maine to the Union. Missouri was a slave state and Maine was a free state. This dual admission — one slave state and one free state — allowed the nation to preserve the existing balance between slave states and free states, maintaining also a balance of power in the U. S. Senate. For nearly 30 years thereafter, states were admitted in free-state/slave-

state pairs. But the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 overrode the Missouri Compromise. It authorized voters in portions of the Louisiana Purchase to decide whether or not to permit slavery. Not long thereafter, in the case of *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857), the U.S. Supreme Court went further. It ruled that Congress could not prohibit slavery in any U.S. territories. In this context, it seemed doubtful that further compromises between free-state and pro-slavery advocates would be possible.

8. Distribute Activity 18.1. Ask the students to read the information it provides about the three alternatives. Discuss the consequences of each alternative. Compare the consequences to the students' earlier predictions.
9. Ask: Did either the North or the South act irrationally in choosing to fight? (*Neither side was irrational in choosing to fight. Instead, each side weighed the costs and benefits of the alternative approaches to eliminating slavery, including the alternative of war. The gains each side expected to achieve [preserving the Union or gaining independence] appeared to be worth the risks, given the apparent costs of the peaceful alternatives. On the eve of the war's outbreak at Fort Sumter, warfare appeared to be the least expensive alternative for resolving the issues related to slavery and the future of the Union.*)

### CLOSURE

Review the conclusion that neither the South nor the North was irrational in deciding to fight. What the conclusion means is that people on each side believed that the benefits of war would be worth the costs of fighting. However, once the war began, people on each side found that they had seriously underestimated the actual costs and the time it would take to bring the war to an end.

**ASSESSMENT**

**Multiple-Choice Questions**

1. Which of the following was not an advantage of the North over the South at the outset of the Civil War?
  - A. More railroad track
  - B. More industry
  - C. A strong military tradition**
  - D. Control of the U.S. Navy
  
2. Which of the following was not an advantage of the South over the North at the outset of the Civil War?
  - A. A clear military objective
  - B. Capacity to fight a defensive war
  - C. Prospect of help from Great Britain
  - D. A large population**

**ESSAY QUESTIONS**

1. A case can be made that the South was unprepared to fight the Civil War. The South had fewer human and industrial resources than the North. Looking back at the South in mid-nineteenth century, William Faulkner asked in a critical voice, “Who else would have declared a war against a power with 10 times the area, 100 times the men, and 1,000 times the resources?” The implication of Faulkner’s remark is that Southern whites were irrational to fight the North. But economists generally assume that people try to act in their own best interest. If that is so, why would the South choose to fight a war that it seemed likely to lose?

*(Possible answer: Well-informed Southern whites knew that the North was better prepared than the South to fight a war. But Southerners hoped the North would tire of the war quickly. The North would have to launch an offensive. It was uncertain that Americans from the North would actually fight hard to kill Americans from the South. And many Southerners took note of instances in which an apparently weaker*

*force had recently prevailed over a force that seemed stronger. Americans, for example, had defeated the British in the American Revolution. In the end, Southerners were willing to fight the war because they thought they could win.)*

2. Identify three alternative approaches to eliminating slavery. Discuss the probable consequences of each alternative. Use this discussion to help explain why the South and the North were willing to fight.

*(Possible answer: Emancipation of slaves without compensation would have meant a large loss of wealth, immediately and in the future, to be borne only by slave owners. Emancipation of slaves with compensation would have shifted the burden of immediate financial loss to U.S. taxpayers, with a larger share of the burden falling on the North than the South. Fighting to eliminate slavery was considered when other compromises had failed, and when both sides thought the war would be short. Both sides judged that the anticipated gains from fighting were greater than the anticipated costs.)*

## VISUAL 18.1

**WHY DID THE SOUTH SECEDE FROM THE UNION?**

Was the South irrational to fight the Civil War? Some people thought so. In *Go Down, Moses* (1942), William Faulkner, a distinguished novelist from Mississippi, put the question in these terms:

*Who else would have declared a war against a power with 10 times the area, 100 times the men, and 1,000 times the resources?*

## VISUAL 18.2

### ADVANTAGES OF THE NORTH

At the outset of the Civil War, the North had many material advantages over the South.

- The North had a population of 22 million.
- The South had a population of 9 million, which included 3.5 million slaves.
- The North had 92 percent of the nation's industries.
- The North had 22,000 miles of railroad track. The South had 9,000.
- The North controlled the U.S. Navy and merchant marine.

## VISUAL 18.3

**ADVANTAGES OF THE SOUTH**

While the South had far fewer material advantages, some elements were in its favor.

- The South had a clear war objective — to win independence. The North fought for the somewhat less definite goals of preserving the Union and eliminating slavery.
- The South needed to fight only to defend its territory. The North had to carry out an invasion.
- The South had a strong military tradition. Many U.S. Army and Navy officers had been recruited from the South. Great arsenals and army bases were located in the South.
- The South believed that its cotton trade with Great Britain and France would cause these nations to provide aid to the Confederacy.

VISUAL 18.4

**ELIMINATING SLAVERY: ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES AND THEIR PROBABLE CONSEQUENCES**

1. Emancipation of the slaves by the owners without compensation.
  - How might this alternative affect slave owners?
  
2. Emancipation of the slaves, with compensation paid to slave owners by the federal government.
  - How might this alternative affect slave owners?
  - How might this alternative affect taxpayers in the North? In the South?
  
3. Fighting to eliminate slavery.
  - Did additional compromise on slavery appear to be likely?
  - What might the benefits be of fighting to eliminate slavery?
  - What might the costs be of fighting to eliminate slavery?

## VISUAL 18.5

**WAS COMPROMISE POSSIBLE?**

- The Missouri Compromise of 1820 admitted Missouri and Maine to the Union. Missouri was a slave state and Maine was a free state.
- This dual admission — one slave state and one free state — allowed the nation to preserve the existing balance between slave states and free states.
- The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 overrode the Missouri Compromise.
- It authorized voters in portions of the Louisiana Purchase to decide whether or not to permit slavery.
- In the case of *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Congress could not prohibit slavery in any U.S. territories.

## ACTIVITY 18.1

# HOW TO ELIMINATE SLAVERY: ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

Prior to the Civil War, there were at least three ways in which the United States might have tried to eliminate slavery. Each approach had uncertainties associated with it, and each would have brought about important consequences. Read the three alternatives presented below; then respond to the **Question for Discussion**.

1. Emancipation of the slaves by the owners without compensation.
  - Large loss of immediate wealth by the slave owners.
  - Large loss of future wealth by the slave owners.
  - Burden of losses would be borne only by the slave owners.
2. Emancipation of the slaves with compensation paid to slave owners by the federal government.
  - The compensation program would require large government outlays.
  - Northerners, because of their larger population, would pay a greater share of the cost.
  - It was not at all clear that the South would accept an offer of compensation for the current value of slaves. And no one proposed compensation for future value.
3. Fighting to eliminate slavery.
  - Politicians for years had tried compromise after compromise to solve the slavery problem. On the eve of the war, no additional compromises were found to which both sides could agree.
  - Both sides expected that the war would be short. The North was aware of its material advantages. The South thought the North would soon tire of fighting an offensive war. In fact the war lasted from 1861 to 1865.
  - Both sides expected that the war would cost less than it did. In fact the war was enormously costly, in money and lives. Historians have estimated the direct cost in dollars at about \$6.5 billion. The cost in lives lost was about 620,000 — nearly as many lives as in all of America's other wars combined

### QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

Did either the North or the South act irrationally in choosing to fight? Explain your answer.